



Living Healthy Working Well

Coping with Alzheimer's Disease

What is Alzheimer's?

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is the most common cause of dementia in older people (i.e., older than 65). AD affects the parts of the brain that control thought, memory, initiative, socialization, and language. The risk of getting the disease increases with age, however, it is not a normal part of aging. Presently, the cause of the disease is unknown and there is no cure.

It is estimated that currently 4 million people in the United States may have Alzheimer's disease. About 3% of men and women aged 65-74 have AD and nearly half of those older than 85 may develop the disease.

Symptoms include:

- initial mild forgetfulness
- confusion with names and simple mathematical problems
- forgetfulness in simple everyday tasks, e.g., brushing teeth
- problems in speaking, understanding conversation, reading, and writing
- behavioral and personality changes
- aggressive, anxious, or aimless behavior

Treatment

Alzheimer's disease advances in stages, ranging from mild forgetfulness to severe dementia. The course of the disease and the rate of decline vary from person

to person. Currently, there is no effective treatment to halt its progression. Medications can help control behavioral symptoms, making patients more comfortable and easier for caregivers to manage. There are also behavioral programs that can help the person with Alzheimer's maintain their abilities as long as possible.

Tips for Caregivers

Caring for a person with Alzheimer's can be overwhelming and exhausting. As a caregiver, it is important that you do not neglect your own physical and mental health.

Dealing with caregiver stress

More than 80 percent of Alzheimer's caregivers report that they often have high levels of stress. Too much stress can be damaging to the caregiver as well as the person with Alzheimer's. Here are some ways to reduce caregiver stress:

- Know what resources are available in your community
- Learn about Alzheimer's disease and caregiving techniques
- Get help from family, friends, and community resources
- Manage your level of stress. This may include talking to a doctor or mental health professional. You can also try using relaxation techniques
- Accept changes as they occur
- Be realistic about what you can do

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- Give yourself credit for what you've done. Don't feel guilty if you lose patience or can't do everything on your own

Stress, anger, and guilt related to caregiving can lead to depression. Caregivers can also feel grief at any point in the disease process. Seek help if the grieving process is so prolonged that it affects your physical or mental well-being.

Changes in relationships

Marriage: If your spouse has Alzheimer's, you will likely experience big changes in your marriage. Your spouse may no longer be able to do things like balancing the checkbook, doing the taxes, handling financial and legal matters, or doing certain household chores. Prepare for this role reversal by locating financial and legal documents soon after your loved one is diagnosed. This includes life insurance policies, property deeds, and retirement accounts. You may need to turn to family, friends, professionals, or community resources for help.

Family and friends: Some family and friends may hesitate to spend time with you and the person with Alzheimer's disease. Often this is because they don't know what to say or do. Take the initiative to talk with family and friends about the disease. Explain that although it has changed your lives in some ways, you value their friendship and support. After inviting them for a visit, prepare them for the changes in the person with Alzheimer's—physically, emotionally, and mentally.

Resolving family conflicts: Caregiving issues can often ignite or magnify family conflicts. This is especially true when people cope differently with caregiving responsibilities. Family members may be in denial. There may be resentment of family members who aren't helping enough or live far away. There also may be disagreements about financial and care decisions. To minimize conflicts, try these ideas:

- **Have a family meeting.** Discussing caregiving roles, responsibilities, problems, and feelings can help ease tensions. You may want help from a professional counselor or clergy.
- **Recognize differences.** Some family members may be hands-on caregivers, responding immediately to issues. Others may be more comfortable with being told what needs to be done.
- **Share responsibilities.** Make a list of tasks and include how much time, money, and effort may be involved to complete them. Divide tasks according to the family member's preferences and abilities.
- **Continue to communicate.** Periodic family meetings or conference calls keep the family up-to-date and involved. Discuss how things are working, reassess the needs of both the person with Alzheimer's and the caregiver, and decide if any changes in responsibilities are needed.

Respite care

Respite care provides caregivers with temporary relief from caregiving tasks. Respite care is mainly offered through community organizations or residential facilities. The most common respite care programs are in-home care and adult day services.

For more information on this topic, or to find a support group, visit the Alzheimer's Association at www.alz.org.

Remember . . .

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available to you and your eligible dependents. EAP counselors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to discuss your concerns and provide confidential assistance at no cost to you. Just call us at 1-800-6-EAP-4-CA (1-800-632-7422). If you are using a TTY, please call 1-800-542-2833. As part of your EAP, you now have access to MagellanAssist. Visit today at <http://www.dpa.ca.gov/benefits/other/eap/Assist.shtm>

Adapted with permission from the Alzheimer's Association at www.alz.org.

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